Food consumption experiences

Food consumption experiences: A framework for understanding food tourists' behavioral intentions

Abstract

Purpose: This study develops a framework to identify the drivers underpinning food tourists' behavioral intentions (BIs). This framework centres on examining how local food consumption value (TLFCV); local food experiential value (TLFEV); and social media influencers (SMIs) impact upon tourists' attitudes toward local food (ATLF) and food destination image (FDI). The impact of ATLF and FDI on tourists' BIs is also examined.

Design/methodology/approach: PLS-SEM was used to test the hypothesized relationships using survey responses from 379 tourists visiting Rasht, Iran.

Findings: The results demonstrate that TLFCV, TLFEV and SMIs can be used to populate a theoretical framework for predicting and understanding the factors influencing tourists' ATLF and FDI. Specifically, positive ATLF and FDI stimulated positive BIs (e.g., intending to recommend Iranian food to others and intending to revisit Iran in future for culinary tourism purposes).

Practical implications: The findings provide managers and practitioners within the culinary tourism industry with suggestions for how best to strategically market their offerings in order to increase inbound food tourism.

Originality/value: This study is one of the first to empirically evaluate the drivers of food tourists' BIs; presenting a newly-developed model for deployment in future research. Originality is also established by simultaneously investigating TLFCV and TLFEV within the context of food tourism.

Keywords: Consumption value; experiential value; social media influencers; attitudes toward local food, food destination image, behavioral intentions, food tourist

1. Introduction

The popularity of food tourism has continued to grow over recent decades (Bu *et al.,* 2020), with a destination's culinary services and heritage increasingly recognized as a core determinant of tourism attraction (Tsai and Wang, 2017). To this end, local food is posited as an important motivating factor underpinning tourists' decisions to travel to specific destinations (Kivela and Crotts, 2006). Thanks to its multi-sensory nature, food holds the potential to play a significant role in shaping tourists' decision-making behaviors (Prayag *et al.*, 2020) and, in order for the hospitality industry to effectively cater to tourists' culinary wants and needs, it is crucial to understand their attitudes and behaviors relating to destination-specific food-related consumption (Cheng and Huang, 2015). Accordingly, in order to develop a more detailed understanding of this specific culinary subset of the wider consumption behaviors associated with hospitality, travel, and tourism, it is important to investigate the importance of experiential value and consumption value in shaping food tourists' attitudes and behaviors (Choe and Kim, 2018; Tsai and Wang, 2017).

The consumption of local food is essential in shaping the overall tourist experience (Kandampully *et al.,* 2018; Mak *et al.,* 2017). However, while some studies examine food consumption within the tourism and hospitality sector more generally (Caber *et al.,* 2018; Choe and Kim, 2019; Choe and Kim, 2018; Okumus, 2020), few focus on the importance *local* food experiences play in shaping tourists' attitudes towards destination culinary offerings and the overall destination image held therein. As such, it is crucial to investigate whether-and-how '*consumption value*' shapes tourists' culinary consumption choices, with this also capable of highlighting how tourists' build destination food images and their attitudes towards local, destination-specific food offerings more generally (Prayag and Ryan, 2012). Moreover, while recognition of the role that culinary experiences play in stimulating positive behavioral responses (e.g., revisit and recommend intentions) is becoming increasingly established across hospitality and tourism literature (Prayag *et al.*, 2020), there remains scope to broaden current understanding of the phenomena (Tsai and Wang, 2017). Yet, more generally, the importance of '*experience*' and experiential consumption is widely discussed across hospitality and tourism literature (Kim, 2014), with researchers increasingly determined to identify the influence experiential value and its related concepts hold over tourist attitudes and behaviors (Gannon *et al.*, 2019).

However, experiential value does not emerge in isolation, and tourists' pre-trip perceptions of foodservice experiences can influence destination image formulation and tourists' attitudes towards local, destination-specific foods (Maghnati and Ling, 2013). To this end, we argue that local food experiential value (TLFEV) and local food consumption value (TLFCV) are crucial in shaping food tourists' attitudes toward local food (ATLF) and play a significant role in molding food destination image (FDI). Gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between experiential value, consumption value, tourists' attitudes, and food destination image within the context of food tourism is crucial, as each has the potential to impact upon the post-consumption behavioral intentions of food tourists (Gannon *et al.* 2017); a positive attitude and

image of a culinary destination can create behaviors capable of building a sustainable food tourism destination (e.g., intention to revisit; recommending it to others) (Kivela and Crotts, 2006). Nevertheless, FDI is not built in a vacuum, with rapid advancements in information technology encouraging tourists to prioritize social media when searching for pre-trip travel and destination-specific information (Freberg *et al*., 2011). The rise of social media has led to the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs) (Dedeoglu *et al.,* 2020; Xu and Pratt, 2018), with these individuals capable of shaping tourist attitudes (Lim *et al*., 2017), destination image (Xu and Pratt, 2018), and ultimately decision-making. By creating and sharing content on social media platforms, some social media influencers have rapidly adopted the role of intellectual leaders (Freberg *et al.,* 2011); deployed strategically by tourism and hospitality industry marketers and investors as an effective marketing tool. However, there is a dearth of studies into the role such SMIs play in shaping food tourists' attitudes, behaviors, and intentions. Thus, extending increased academic interest in the phenomena more generally (Xu and Pratt, 2018; Lim *et al.,* 2017), this study also examines the role SMIs play specific to the food tourism context.

To this end, this study aims to investigate factors capable of shaping the behavioral intentions (BIs) of food tourists in Rasht, Iran. In doing so, it contributes to culinary tourism literature in several ways. First, it responds to recent calls to examine the relationship between TLFCV and more established visitor perceptions and behaviors (Choe and Kim, 2018). Thus, while a small number of studies have examined the impact of TLFCV on tourist perceptions and behaviors (Kim and Cho, 2019; Cho and Kim, 2019), this study aims to extend upon extant research by examining the as yet overlooked direct effect of TLFCV on ATLF and FDI, alongside how these factors subsequently impact upon tourists' behavioral intentions. Second, previous studies emphasize that the concept of experiential value requires further study across different industries and product/service categories (Wu and Liang, 2009); with food tourism receiving limited attention to-date (Tsai and Wang, 2017). Hence, to explore the factors influencing food tourists' BIs, this study examines the effect of TLFEV on tourist perceptions and behaviors. Third, despite the increased importance SMIs play in shaping tourists' behaviors and perceptions more generally (Lim *et al*., 2017), their potential influence specific to food tourism (i.e., ATLF; FDI) has yet to receive sufficient academic attention (Canovi and Pucciarelli, 2019). Accordingly, this study aims to benefit food tourism businesses and hospitality industry decision-makers within tourism-dominated economies by providing greater insight into how the behavioral intentions of food tourists are formed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Consumption value theory (TCV)

Consumption Value Theory (TCV) was proposed by Sheth *et al*. (1991) to explain why consumers prefer to buy particular products and why they may prefer one type of product over another (Gonçalves *et al.,* 2016). TCV assumes that consumer preferences are affected by

multiple pre-consumption cues, namely the potential functional, emotional, social, or epistemic value a product or service is perceived as holding. The prominence of each source of value is contingent upon the consumption situation (Rousta and Jamshidi, 2020). For example, while functional value has traditionally been considered the major factor shaping consumer decision-making (Williams and Soutar, 2009) it nevertheless includes a range of characteristics (e.g., quality, price, usefulness) (Perrea *et al.,* 2015). Yet, traditional tourism activities (e.g., eating local food; visiting museums; leisure activities) also hold emotional value (e.g., fun, entertainment) (Sanchez *et al.,* 2006). Emotional value plays a key role in shaping tourists' attitudes toward destinations as, both during- and post-trip, it can determine whether they derive satisfaction from consumption experiences undertaken therein alongside predicating whether they are likely to revisit the destination again in the future (Sanchez *et al.,* 2006).

Further, as a pursuit rarely undertaken in complete isolation, the social value derived from experiences, interactions, and more tangible modes of consumption is also critical in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors within the hospitality and tourism context (Williams and Soutar, 2009). To this end, Goolaup and Mossberg (2017) revealed that, for many tourists, satisfaction is contingent upon positive interactions with friends and family, with this particularly important when enjoying destination-specific food in authentic local restaurants (Prayag et al., 2020). Further, Williams *et al.* (2015) state that food festivals perhaps best-reflect the important role that social interaction and perceived social value play in shaping tourists' attitudes and behaviors, with satisfaction with the food festival experience often contingent upon the nature of interactions between vendors and tourists (Gannon *et al.*, 2019). Finally, epistemic value includes a sense of curiosity, the acquisition of new experiences, and the search for knowledge (Sheth *et al.,* 1991). Food tourism holds the potential to acknowledge each of these sources of epistemic value, particularly when tourists are demonstrate curiosity with regards to destination-specific food offerings and are eager to learn about local food preparation techniques, dining customs, and consumption habits (Choe and Kim, 2018; Prayag *et al.*, 2020).

As a result, TCV presents a multidimensional structure of consumer value which has been used across extant food tourism literature (Cho and Kim, 2018; Kim and Cho, 2019). This multidimensional conceptualization of customer value can predict tourists' intentions better than a one-dimensional approach (Gonçalves *et al.,* 2016), with each dimension of consumption value capable of providing insight into the relationships between tourist choices and reactions: both in isolation and as a whole (Phau *et al.,* 2014). Accordingly, this draws upon the seven dimensions of consumption value presented by Choe and Kim (2019), consistent with the view that the dimensions of consumption value deployed across previous studies focus on durable goods and therefore cannot be used to assess the consumption value of local foods.

2.2 Experiential value (EV)

EV can be considered as the value of customers' judgments based on experiential perceptions and is the result of direct and indirect interactions during the consumption process (Chen and

Lin, 2015). The EV of 'eating' is derived from the consumption of tangible products and intangible services, which includes many distinctive features (Mohamed *et al*., 2020). Therefore, it is important to study the EV of food and eating by using multiple dimensions. While previous studies examining culinary tourism identify a range of EV dimensions (Barnes *et al*., 2020; Wu *et al*., 2018), this study draws upon those presented by Mathwich (2001) (**Figure 1**): Customer Return on Investment (CROI); Service Excellence; Aesthetics; and Playfulness. This categorization draws upon both Intrinsic-Extrinsic Value and Active-Reactive Value dimensions. For example, CROI is an active source of extrinsic value that reflects the beneficial aspects of consumption and includes the active investment of financial, temporal, behavioral, and psychological resources that have the potential to stimulate experiential 'returns'. Service Excellence is a reactive source of extrinsic value, indicating the general appreciation consumers hold towards service providers as a result of their commitment, expertise, and performance within consumption settings. Aesthetic value is a reactive source of intrinsic value. It captures consumers' response to the experiential value derived from the overall design, layout, and aesthetics of service environments, provided the service encounter functions appropriately therein. Finally, playfulness is an active source of intrinsic value where, through consumption, individuals find a way to temporarily escape from life and its realities along by undertaking experiences that stimulate feelings of fun and enjoyment (Mathwick *et al*., 2001).

[Figure 1 here]

2.3 Social learning theory (SLT)

SLT proposes that individuals are motivated by socialization agents through direct or indirect social interactions (Moschis and Churchill, 1978). Previous marketing studies have adopted SLT to gain an understanding of consumption behaviors influenced by various social agents (e.g., celebrities, family, or peers) (Makgosa, 2010). In this study, we use SLT to understand consumer behavior within the food tourism context; exploring whether social media influencers (SMIs) shape food tourists' attitudes and behaviors. Per Makgosa (2010), SLT can be used to understand the influence of SMIs over food tourists' decision-making and behaviors thanks to their position as independent third-party endorsers engaging audiences through social media (Dedeoglu *et al.,* 2020; Lim *et al.,* 2017). SMIs can be deployed by destination food marketers to encourage tourist interest and strengthen the destination's food image (Xu and Pratt, 2018). SMIs are often considered credible, reliable, and relatable, building strong relationships with their audience (Dedeoglu *et al.,* 2020); with news media reporting that 80% of online marketers suggest that SMIs support can boost marketing performance (Forbes, 2017). Therefore, in line with the central conceit of SLT, SMIs involvement in destination marketing activities may hold the potential to shape the attitudes, behaviors, and intentions of food tourists (Lim *et al.,* 2017).

Further, based on the cognitive and affective components of tourists' perceptions, destination image is formed (Baloglu and Mccleary, 1999). Accordingly, FDI implies a cognitive and affective perception of local food in a particular destination. Farris *et al.* (2003) suggest that

consumer attitudes are shaped by their beliefs and feelings about specific firms, brands, products, and services. Recognizing this, ATLF refers to food tourists' responses to local foods or foodservice providers. Further, post-consumption behavioral intentions are also crucial within the food tourism context, with tourists' intentions to recommend local food and intentions to revisit the destination for food tourism purposes considered core behavioral intentions within this study (Choe and Kim, 2018). An overview of the research hypotheses is presented in **Figure 2**, with postulated relationships discussed hereafter.

[Figure 2 here]

3. Hypothesis development

3.1 Local food consumption value (TLFCV) and attitudes towards local food (ATLF)

Experiencing high-quality products and services can arouse positive feelings for tourists, with this capable of stimulating positive behaviors in future. As such, for *food tourists*, the quality of local food (and associated service settings (e.g., restaurants)) remains a core determinant of perceived experiential value (Namkung and Jang, 2010). Accordingly, a range of food attributes (e.g., quality; taste; emotional response) combine to shape food tourists' attitudes and behaviors (Kim and Eves, 2012; Kivela and Crotts, 2006). However, balance is required; while unique food experiences in destinations are sought by tourists, they must also be protected against health risks (Choe and Kim, 2018). Kim and Eves (2012) demonstrate that 'health value' contributes to tourists' appraisal of local foods. Similarly, financial value remains an obvious underlying determinant of tourists' attitudes towards local foods. For example, Yee (2015) reviewed popular food blog comments, concluding that tourists are most positive towards reasonably-priced local foods.

However, less obvious sources of value also contribute to tourists' attitudes towards local foods. For example, emotional value influences tourists' evaluation of tourism products and services more generally (Lee *et al.,* 2011), with fun, pleasure, excitement, or relaxation derived from culinary experiences likely to stimulate positive behavioral intentions in food tourists (Ha and Jang, 2010). Further, prestige and/or social value can also play an important role in tourism service provision as it can alter tourists' attitudes and behaviors, increase during- and post-experience satisfaction, and shape destination image on an ongoing basis (Perrea *et al.,* 2015). Finally, gaining the experience of new foods local to a specific destination can satisfy the curiosity of tourists, contributing to epistemic value and developing positive cognitive responses in the process (Fields, 2002); a crucial precursor to positive attitude development within the tourism and hospitality context (Williams and Soutar, 2009). Thus:

H1. TLFCV positively affects ATLF among food tourists.

3.2 Tourist' local food consumption value (TLFCV) and food destination image (FDI)

The term food destination image (FDI) refers to the perceptions held by tourists with regards to the culinary services, produce, and heritage available at the destinations they visit, with these food-centric characteristics arguably more relevant within the food tourism context than other, more traditional destination image markers (e.g., weather, beaches, local people) (Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun, 2019). Accordingly, FDI is typically cognitive and affective, whereas TCV identifies the main added-value drivers and primary motivational factors underpinning destination selection (Lee *et al.,* 2002). Thus, assuming TLFCV serves as a primary motivational factor stimulating food tourism; it holds the potential to shape tourists' perceptions of a destination's culinary offerings. Ramkissoon *et al*. (2009) conclude that destination image is a function of consumption value, in-turn influencing travel behavior. Further, Tapachai and Waryszak (2000) state that: i) tourists in the process of deciding between potential travel destinations form respective destination images underpinned by consumption values, and ii) destination image shaped by consumption values influences whether tourists ultimately visit a destination. Accordingly, within the food tourism context, it is important to understand whether-and-how consumption value shapes FDI (Prayag and Ryan, 2012). Thus:

H2. TLFCV has a positive relationship with FDI in food tourism.

3.3 Tourist's local food experiential value (TLFEV) and attitude toward local food (ATLF)

According to Hogg *et al*. (2006), attitudes are underpinned by a range of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive components. The emotional elements of attitude development are comprised of the general feelings consumers hold regarding a phenomenon. This is therefore inherently instinctive and not necessarily driven by experiences (Malhotra, 2005). Conversely, the behavioral components of attitude development are stimulated by consumers' experiences and behaviors; simply, where individuals derive current attitudes from previous behaviors. Finally, the cognitive components of an individual's 'attitude' stem from the beliefs, thoughts, and attributes one assigns to subjects, whether positive or negative (Hogg *et al.,* 2006). Malhotra (2005) argues that individuals can control the cognitive elements of attitude when these are influenced by one's experiences. If personal experience is lacking, individuals tend to exhibit emotional reactions and, if personal experiences are plentiful, attitudes are drawn from cognitive reactions. Hence, individuals' attitudes are influenced by their personal experiences (or lack thereof) of different situations. To this end, Keng *et al*. (2007) suggest that experiential value has a positive effect on consumer attitudes and Nambisan and Baron (2007) propose that attitudes are influenced by experiential values driven primarily from their own personality. Thus:

H3. TLFEV has a positive impact on ATLF for food tourists.

3.4 Tourist's local food experiential value (TLFEV) and food destination image (FDI)

As stated prior, the experiential value of food is underpinned by CROI, service excellence, aesthetics, and playfulness. Thus, price sensitivity can influence whether tourists are likely to engage in tourism activities (Masiero and Nicolau, 2012); with the cost of undertaking the

activity balanced against the potential for satisfaction derived therein. Nonetheless, CROI value is typically derived from personal evaluations (Tsai and Wand, 2017); high CROI may result in strong FDI, while low CROI may decrease FDI. Second, service excellence can ameliorate destination image (Tsai and Wang, 2017), with this also applicable within a food tourism context (Wu, 2013). Third, the aesthetics of culinary tourism experiences can shape FDI (Tsai and Wang, 2017). Accordingly, recognizing the perceived hedonic value inherent to consumption within well-designed service settings (e.g., restaurant interiors) aesthetic value stimulates sensory and emotional feelings and can lead to positive BIs (Lochrie *et al*., 2019). Finally, Teng and Chang (2013) propose that entertainment in restaurants can increase consumer perceptions of food quality, with this likely to influence tourists' during- and post-consumption emotional reactions, with this proving critical in building positive FDI when shared with others. Thus:

H4. TLFEV positively impacts FDI in food tourism.

3.5 Social media influencers (SMI) and attitude toward local food (ATLF)

SMIs perceived as 'reliable' have the potential to positively influence consumer (including tourist) perceptions (Goldsmith *et al.,* 2000). Reliability and expertise demonstrate an SMI's credibility, with information disseminated by credible SMIs across social media platforms capable of shaping the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of tourists (Dedeoglu *et al.,* 2020). Proper fit between SMIs and FDI may prove critical to the development of successful marketing strategy as tourists often consume foods endorsed by a popular person (Fowles, 1996). Experimental studies also suggest that transmission of meaning from influencers to consumers holds the potential to shape the attitude of tourists (Peetz *et al.,* 2004). Thus:

H5. SMIs positively influences ATLF among food tourists.

3.6 Social media influencers (SMI) and food destination image (FDI)

Some destinations deploy SMIs as destination spokespersons as a deliberate marketing strategy to boost destination image (Xu and Pratt, 2018). This is due to the fact that influencers are generally regarded by people as having high social standing, which can be used as a powerful tool in differentiating destination image (Davies and Slater, 2015). To this end, Van der Veen (2008) examined the support of SMIs within the tourism industry and found that, if destination marketing goals are supported by appropriate and relevant SMIs, tourists may hold favorable attitudes with regards to destination image. Thus:

H6. SMIs positively influences FDI in food tourism.

3.7 Attitude toward local food (ATLF) and behavioral intentions (BIs)

Previous studies focused on the concept of consumer attitude recognize its role in predicting pre, during, and post-consumption decisions or behaviors (Bagozzi *et al*., 2003). As a predictor of behavioral intentions, the effectiveness of attitude has been studied in a range of ways (Morris *et*

al., 2009). For example, Maio and Haddock (2010) postulate that attitude determines people's behavior toward their surroundings. Accordingly, attitude determines the type of behavior exhibited by consumers under different conditions, with this capable of being shaped and crafted by service providers (Hogg *et al*., 2006). Studies show that if a tourist holds a positive attitude to a specific food available at a travel destination, this has the ability to influence whether they intend to revisit that destination in future or recommend it to others (Lee, 2009). Thus:

H7. ATLF has a positive impact on BIs for food tourists.

3.8 Food destination image (FDI) and behavioral intentions (BIs)

Following travel experiences, behavioral intentions (e.g., the intention to revisit a destination and/or the desire to recommend the destination and experiences undertaken therein to others) are formed (Gannon *et al.*, 2017; Tian-Cole *et al*., 2002). Cognitive and affective images resulting from an experience are considered antecedents of future behavioral intentions towards a destination (Qu *et al*., 2011). Cognitive-affective overall and cognitive-affective joint images can influence tourists' intention to revisit and recommend a destination and experiences therein to others (Zhang *et al*., 2014). Echoing this, Lai *et al*. (2020) recently concluded that cognitive and affective food image components help to form tourists' behavioral intentions. Thus:

H8. FDI has a positive relationship with BIs for food tourists.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study context

This study focuses on a destination known for its culinary heritage: Rasht, Iran. As such, the research model (**Figure 2**) is evaluated within the context of a local variation of the internationally-renowned Persian cuisine. Per Kivela and Crotts (2006), we focus on foreign tourists whose main reason for traveling to Rasht was to enjoy the local cuisine. Rasht boasts significant food diversity when compared to other cities in Iran and is the only Iranian city recognized by UNESCO (2015) as a creative food city, with this designation attracting food tourists in significant numbers (Mehrabadi et al., 2017). Further, Rasht is known for various different types of local food products, each well-known enough to influence tourist decision-making and behaviors (Rousta and Jamshidi, 2020). As such, the city has the potential to draw upon its culinary heritage for promotion purposes; opening the door for significant sustainable tourism development and the associated economic boon in the process (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019). Finally, studies investigating the behaviors and attitudes of foreign tourists visiting Iran have been mostly in the field of heritage tourism (Gannon *et al.,* 2020; Rasoolimanesh *et al*., 2019), travel agencies (Taheri *et al.,* 2019), and medical tourism (Taheri *et al.,* 2020), with food tourism yet to receive sufficient attention despite Iran's (and Rasht's) established culinary heritage (Prayag *et al.*, 2020).

4.2 Sample and data collection

Data were collected from foreign tourists in the traditional restaurants of Rasht. When distributing the questionnaire potential participants were first asked to clarify the main motivation for their trip. As Rasht holds natural and historical significance, some tourists mentioned these attractions as their main motivation for traveling; the questionnaire was not provided to these individuals as they were not deemed primarily 'food tourists'. Five hospitality management postgraduate students helped collect the data between July and September 2019.To minimize Common Method Variance (CMV) participant information was collected in accordance with ethical considerations, with openness and honesty, informed consent, protection from harm, right to withdraw, anonymity, and confidentiality assured (Taheri *et al.,* 2019). The questionnaire was prepared in English and reviewed by academic specialists to prevent language errors. Independent and dependent constructs were placed in different areas within the survey; again, to guard against CMV. Participants were not informed about the research aim in order to mitigate against response bias. A pilot study with 30 food tourists was implemented to ensure data reliability and validity. Based on the pilot stage, we revised some statements in pursuit of greater overall clarity.

Given the limited research population, we used the Cochran formula for limited communities and selected 384 individuals as the study sample. Using the below formula, the minimum required sample size of a statistical population can be estimated:

$$n = \frac{\frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}}{1 + \frac{1}{N}\left[\frac{z^2 pq}{d^2} - 1\right]}$$

In the above formula, p and q represent the success and failure ratios, considered to be 0.5. The value of Z^2 at error level 0.05 is 1.96. The error value d is also considered to be 0.05. The value of N represents the size of the target community. To ensure that the questionnaires were completed to the required number, 20% was added to the sample size and 460 questionnaires were distributed to food tourists. After extensive follow-up, 427 questionnaires were returned. Based on initial data screening, 379 questionnaires were identified as appropriate for statistical analysis.

4.3 Measures

All items were adapted from previous research and informants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1="*strongly disagree*"; 5="*strongly agree*"). To measure the higher-order TLFEV construct, four underlying first-order constructs adapted from Mathwick *et al.* (2001) were measured: consumer return on investment (3-items), service excellence (3-items), aesthetics (3-items) and playfulness (3-items). FDI was measured via four statements taken from Horng *et al.* (2012), revised to demonstrate relevance to tourists' perceptions of food in *Rasht*. To measure higher-order BIs, two underlying first-order constructs (Intention to recommend food (3-items) and Intention to revisit the destination for food tourism (3-items) were adapted from Tian-Cole *et al.* (2002). To measure

higher-order TLFCV, seven underlying first-order constructs were used: Taste/quality value (3-items), health value (3-items), price value (2-items), emotional value (3-items), prestige value (3-items), interaction value (2-items), and epistemic value (3-items) from Choe and Kim (2018). Four items were adapted from previous studies for ATLF (Hsu and Chen, 2014), and four items were adapted from Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2019) to measure SMIs. **Table I** shows constructs and respective items.

[Table I here]

4.4 Statistical procedure

If data has non-normal properties, the hypotheses expressed in the research are not sufficiently explored, and the research model is relatively complex, PLS-SEM can be used instead of traditional methods of covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) (Wells *et al.,* 2016; Hair *et al.,* 2016). First, most *z*-values (obtained by dividing statistic value with standard error) did not fall within the -1.96 to +1.96 range. Further, the Shapiro–Wilk test results obtained for each variable was <0.05. Thus, we can classify the data as non-normal (Hair *et al.,* 2010). Second, PLS-SEM is appropriate for structural models with large numbers of indicators. In this study, the model includes 47 indicators. It is therefore practical to use PLS-SEM. Finally, PLS-SEM is suitable for formative, reflective, and second-order models (Hair *et al.,* 2016), consistent with this study.

The non-parametric bootstrapping technique was used with 379 cases, 5000 subsamples and individual sign changes; comprising a two-step modeling approach (Hair *et al.,* 2016). Accordingly, the measurement model was approved using confirmatory factor analysis and all constructs were considered correlated factors. At this stage, the reliability and validity of all variables were examined. Following this, the structural model created based on the hypotheses was examined.

5.Results

In PLS-SEM, validity and reliability are used to evaluate the measurement model. Reliability indicators (CR*;* ρA; α) were used to measure construct reliability in this study. First-order loadings of associated items for each reflective construct were used to measure indicator reliability. Validity is assessed through convergent validity and discriminant validity. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to measure convergent validity. The results demonstrate outer loadings >0.7, α >0.6, and AVE >0.5, establishing reliability and validity. Nevertheless, if CR/AVE fall within the acceptable range, loading and indicator weights >0.5 and <0.7 can be accepted (Hair *et al.,* 2010). **Table 1** shows the results of each test used to evaluate the measurement model.

Square root of AVEs was used to establish discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The square root of the AVE from each construct is much larger than the correlation

shared between the contract and the other constructs in the model. Therefore, per **Table II**, it can be concluded that discriminant validity is acceptable. Nevertheless, we also used heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ration of correlations to further measure discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). HTMT criterion values ranged from 0.04-0.84 (below the 0.85 threshold). Thus discriminant validity was established. Higher-order constructs were validated through the weights of first-order constructs, the significance of weights, and multicollinearity (Becker, Klein, and Wetzels, 2012). The weights of underlying dimensions to their respective higher-order constructs were significant, and all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were <5 (Hair et al. 2017). Full collinearity VIF was used to assess common method variance. As per **Table I**, the collinearity VIFs of all constructs ranged from 1.19-2.08; below the critical value of 3.3, suggesting no multicollinearity.

[Table II here]

5.1 Structural model and key findings

The quality of the structural model was tested based on coefficients of determination (R^2) (Hair *et al*., 2016); predictive relevance (Q^2); effect size (f^2); Standardized Root Mean Square Residuals (SRMR) (Henseler *et al*., 2015); and Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) (Hair *et al*., 2016). R^2 was used to ascertain the predictive accuracy of the model. Generally, R^2 values of 0.26, 0.13, and 0.02 are considered large, medium, and weak respectively (Hair *et al*., 2016). **Figure 3** shows that ATLF and FDI had strong predictive accuracy provided BIs had weak predictive accuracy. In addition to R^2, the structural model prediction relationship can be investigated using Q^2 values obtained via blindfolding. Every Q^2 was greater than 0.0. Thus, all endogenous variables demonstrate predictive relevance. In a situation where a relationship involves multiple predictors, effect size must be examined. Hair *et al*. (2010) suggests 0.01 (S), 0.06 (M) and 0.14 (L) signify the size of effect in SEM. As demonstrated in **Table III**, excluding the strong direct relationship between SMIs with ATLF and FDI, the direct relationship studied were generally weak. Model SRMR was 0.078; below Henseler *et al.'s* (2015) 0.08 recommendation. Finally, we computed model GoF. Following Hair *et al*. (2016), a general criterion for GoF assessment is to compute the geometric mean of the average communality and average R^2. Values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36 are suggested as weak, medium, and strong respective values for goodness of overall model fit (Hair *et al.,* 2010). The GOF value for the study model was approximately 0.38, indicating strong overall fit.

[Table III & Figure 3 here]

The results demonstrate that TLFCV was positively related with ATLF (β=0.13, t=2.64) and FDI (β=0.12, t=2.75). Further, TLFEV was positively related with ATLF (β=0.11, t=2.57) and FDI (β=0.12, t=3.02), and SMIs was positively related with ATLF (β=0.48, t=10.73) and FDI (β=0.52, t=13.57). Finally, ATLF (β=0.18, t=2.96) and FDI (β=0.18, t=3.26) had a direct

relationship with BIs. **Table III** summarizes the SEM results, and **Figure 3** visualizes direct paths within the structural model.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1 Conclusions

This study evaluated behavioral intentions (BIs) and their stimulants within the context of food tourism, suggesting that ATLF and FDI influenced by TLFCV, TLFEV, and SMIs can explain the BIs of tourists. Recognizing the importance of the underlying dimensions of TLFCV and TLFEV, alongside the role played by SMIs, the findings demonstrate that ATF and FDI can stimulate tourists' intentions to a) recommend destination-specific food to others, and b) revisit destinations for food tourism in the future. Previous culinary tourism studies suggest that TLFCV influences ATLF (Choe and Kim, 2018) and experiential value influences FDI (Tsai and Wang, 2017). However, our newly-tested model expands upon extant food tourism literature by showing that TLFCV *and* TLFEV are positively associated with both ATF and FDI. Further, culinary tourism research has yet to thoroughly examine the impact of SMIs on the formation of FDI and ATF. Consequently, the proposed model affirms the significance of TLFCV, TLFEV, and SMIs in shaping the FDI and ATF as antecedents of BIs.

6.2 Theoretical implications

The study findings emphasize the potential role that TLFCV, TLFEV, and SMIs play in shaping the BIs of food tourists through ATLF and FDI. Supporting ***H1*** and ***H2***, a positive relationship was found between TLFCV with ATLF and FDI. The results show that tourists who perceived high taste/quality value, health value, price value, emotional value, prestige value, interaction value, and epistemic value hold a positive ATLF and FDI of Rasht. This study also extends extant food tourism and hospitality marketing scholarship by providing the nascent insight required to better-understand the impact of TLFEV on food tourists' attitudes, behaviors, and intentions. The positive relationship between TLFEV with ATLF and FDI (***H3*** and ***H4***) indicates the importance of experiential value among food tourists. Accordingly, the findings suggest that CROI, service excellence, aesthetics, and playfulness can prove critical in developing the experiential value required to improve tourists' perceptions of ATLF and FDI. These results suggest that ATLF and FDI are formed among food tourists from multiple value dimensions. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the findings demonstrate that an appealing tourism product (e.g., Rasht's local cuisine) that satisfies tourist expectations can also affect FDI and ATLF.

Supporting ***H5*** and ***H6***, a positive relationship was found between SMIs with ATLF and FDI. Celebrity endorsements have been used as an effective marketing tool in a range of industries, and the results of this study confirm this within the overlooked food tourism context. Thus, while the effect of influencers on tourists' attitudes and images of a destination has been studied (Xu and Pratt, 2018; Lim *et al.,* 2017), this study extends previous research in suggesting

that attractive tourism and hospitality products/services more generally can affect the food image of the destination (Tseng *et al.,* 2015). However, the findings also suggest that it is crucial not to underestimate the importance of the human element in building trust in tourism and/or hospitality products or services (Cooley and Parks-Yancy, 2019). As such, if the local food of Rasht remains the core tourism attraction, with SMIs used to *support* this product as opposed to the other way around, FDI and ATLF will be stimulated in a more sincere manner (Taheri et al., 2018). Finally, supporting ***H7*** and ***H8***, a positive relationship was found between ATFL and FDI with BIs. A positive ATLF and FDI lead to an intention to revisit the destination for food tourism in future an intention to recommend food-related consumption and experiences undertaken therein to others. While these two behavioral intentions remain consistent with those investigated more generally across tourism and hospitality research (Curran *et al.*, 2018; Thompson *et al.*, 2018), adapting their application to the food tourism context also serves as a minor theoretical contribution specific to this study.

6.3 Practical implications

This study offers practical implications for hospitality and tourism managers, demonstrating that tourists consider a range of different sources of consumption value when developing their attitudes toward local food (ATLF) and food destination image (FDI) within the context of culinary consumption experiences undertaken in Rasht, Iran. Thus, tourism and hospitality managers should seek to provide high levels of service quality by offering diverse flavors, dishes, and menus, while nonetheless ensuring tourists have access to authentic local food at reasonable prices. Restaurants in Rasht should pay extra attention to offering hygienic and safe food to tourists – in line with international, if not necessarily domestic, norms. For example, restaurants in Rasht hoping to cater to tourists may wish to adopt an 'open kitchen' design in order to support the promotion of "healthy local food"; satisfying tourists' curiosity and desire to build knowledge (epistemic value) while remaining fundamentally safe and hygienic (health value).

Further, advertising and promotion materials should exclusively appeal to tourists' positive emotions. As emotional value is a significant contributor to ATLF for tourists in general (Lee *et al*., 2011), local businesses must emphasize that the culinary offering available throughout Rasht can generate happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction. Further, by designing service environments in a manner which stimulates a friendly and exciting atmosphere (e.g., using traditional music, serving local dishes, and creating a Iranian atmosphere using local handicrafts), the emotional value of culinary consumption can transcend the tangible satisfaction tourists derive from the food itself (Yalinay *et al.,* 2018). This is consistent with findings herein suggesting that socialization and interaction with friends and relatives can increase the consumption value derived from food experiences. However, while traveling to Rasht, tourists may interact with other parties (e.g., tour-guides; locals; waiters). Such interactions hold the potential to increase the consumption value derived from food, with this likely to prove significant given the established sincerity of local Iranians within hospitality settings (Taheri *et*

al., 2018). Epistemic value also stimulates tourists' interest in learning about local culture. Local food businesses should therefore provide opportunities for tourists to learn new cooking techniques on-site (Prayag *et al.*, 2020). When food consumption experiences provide high levels of epistemic value, lasting memories are created. Thus, this study holds wilder value for Iranian hospitality and tourism operators and educators, stressing the importance of offering creative and interactive local culinary experiences to tourists, as opposed to those centered purely on the tangible provenance and characteristics of the food itself. Such a creative educational approach can develop a clear image underpinned by the quality and authenticity of local cuisine and culinary experiences therein, extending the social context for tourists' in-destination food consumption beyond Rasht and, in doing so, increase their satisfaction with the city's food destination image (Jafari *et al.,* 2013).

As such, while the findings emphasize the importance of experiential value within the food tourism context, it is also recommended to provide tourists with local foods available at different price ranges, while maintaining common core characteristics such as fast delivery and high-quality service. In designing the food serving space, relevant parties within the hospitality and tourism sector should pay attention to aesthetics and the comfort of tourists. As Rasht has a reputation for pristine nature and unspoiled seaside, industry managers should endeavor to take advantage of these natural characteristics in order to develop a distinct destination image. For example, food could be served off-site in forest and sea environments; encapsulating the peace and tranquility of the region while also providing tourists with the opportunity to undertake memorable culinary consumption (Taheri *et al.,* 2020). This suggestion also has implications with regards to the underutilized deployment of social media influencers in the development of food tourism in Iran. As influencers can guide tourists' decisions to travel to a destination and consume local food therein (Dedeoglu *et al.,* 2020), developing a culinary industry underpinned by the aforementioned high-quality experiences capable of stimulating epistemic value could prove pivotal in building Rasht's reputation as a food tourism hub. As such, creating positive ATLF is necessary for industry managers hoping to build Rasht into a sustainable culinary tourism destination, as tourists who hold favorable ATLF convey positive opinions to others and are likely to demonstrate a desire to return to Rasht in the future. If this strategy is designed according to TLFCV, TLFEV, and draws upon support from social media influencers, the expectations and needs of tourists are more likely to be met, encouraging them to return to Rasht in the future and recommend the destination to others.

6.4 Limitations and future research

This study is limited as the scales used to measure food tourists' BIs was adopted from prior research. As such, future studies should examine this model across multiple contexts in order to analyze the relationship between tourists' food values and other perceptions or behaviors in greater depth. The impact of tourists' cultural background as a moderator variable should also be introduced to the research model in future studies. Attitudes towards food tourism may vary

depending on the demographic characteristics of individuals (e.g., gender, marital status, age, and income), with this overlooked in the present study. Future studies should also scrutinize the impact of experiential values on two different groups: high-income tourists versus low-income ones. Further, the influence experiential value holds over food destination image could be compared across a variety of food businesses, such as theme restaurants, coffee shops, and street foods stalls. The study is also limited as it draws upon tourists visiting Rasht, Iran. Therefore, care should be taken when applying the results herein to culinary tourism in other countries; diverse cultures and cultural backgrounds are likely to yield different results. Finally, this is a cross-sectional study; therefore, future studies should investigate the changing attitudes of food tourists over an extended period of time can be explored using probability sampling and a longitudinal study.

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